

Today is Father's Day; a day when we honor dear old dad and give him a funny card, a tie or some gift that he will never use. There was a wealthy Texan who was in the habit of giving his dad unique gifts for Father's Day. One year he gave him lessons on hang-gliding. The next year he gave him a collection of Ray Charles' greatest hits. But this year he felt that he had outdone himself. He purchased a rare talking bird that could speak five different languages and could sing "The Yellow Rose of Texas" while standing on one foot. This talented bird cost \$10,000, but the son thought it was worth every penny. This would be the Father's Day gift that his dad would never forget. A week after Father's Day, he called his dad and asked: "Dad how did you like the bird?" "It was delicious," his father replied.

Now some of us have pleasant memories and relationships with our father, while some of us don't. We have all had different kinds of fathers – great ones, so-so, bad and absent. While I loved my father dearly, he was not perfect and he had his faults. And if you asked my sons, they would probably say the same about me. But I keep on trying to be a better father and now a grandfather, and one the best sources of guidance for me is the Bible. So, this morning let's see what the Apostle Paul has to say about being a father, a parent and a grandparent in the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the first four verses.

Read Ephesians 6:1-4

To really understand this passage, let me give you some background. When you study the Early Church, you find that Christianity played a significant role in establishing the rights of women and children. In the ancient world children were very much under the domination of their parents, mainly their father. The supreme example was the Roman law of the father's power. Under this rule, a father could basically do anything he wanted to with his child. He could sell him into slavery or he could make him work as a laborer on his farm (my father definitely applied this one when I was growing up). The father even had the right to condemn his child to death and to carry out the execution. As long as the father lived, his power over the child still existed no matter how old the child was. All the privileges and rights belonged to the father and all the duties belonged to the child.

In this passage and in his other letters, the Apostle Paul tried to establish the rights of women and children and the importance of love in the Christian family. Now while our text for this morning focuses on the role of the father as the head of the household as was the case in ancient times, today this role is shared by both men and women depending on the individual family situation. So ladies don't cross your arms and go to sleep, this message applies to you as well.

But getting back to dads, how would you describe the ideal father? Erma Bombeck tells the story about the time the good Lord created fathers. He started with a tall frame. A female angel standing nearby interjected: "What kind of father is that? If you're going to make children so close to the ground, why have you put fathers up so high? He won't be able to shoot marbles without kneeling, tuck a child into bed without bending over or even kiss his child without a lot of stooping?"

God smiled and said: "Yes, but if I make him child-size, who would children have to look up to?" When God made a father's hands, they were large and muscular. The angel shook her head sadly and said: "Large hands are clumsy. They can't manage diaper pins, small buttons, and rubber bands on ponytails or even remove splinters caused by wooden baseball bats." God smiled again and said: "I know, but they're large enough to hold everything a small boy empties from his pockets at the end of the day and yet small enough to cup a child's face."

Next God molded long, slim legs and broad shoulders. The angel nearly had a heart attack: "Do you realize you just made a father without a lap? How is he going to pull a child close to him without the kid falling between his legs?" Again God smiled and replied: "A mother needs a lap. A father needs strong shoulders to pull a sled, balance a child on a bicycle or hold a sleepy head on the way home from the circus."

God was in the middle of creating two of the largest feet anyone had ever seen when the angel could not contain herself any longer. "That's not fair. Do you honestly think those large boats are going to dig out of bed early in the morning when the baby cries? Or walk through a small birthday party without crushing at least three of the guests?" And God smiled and said: "They'll work. You'll see. They'll support a small child who wants to ride a horse or scare off mice at the summer cabin or display shoes that will be a challenge to fill."

God worked throughout the night, giving the father few words, but a firm powerful voice and eyes that saw everything but remained calm and tolerant. Finally, almost as an afterthought, God added tears. Then He turned to the angel and said: "Now are you satisfied that he can love as much as a mother?" The angel had no response!

While our fathers may have passed on or we may not have known our father, hopefully we have had a father-figure; someone who filled the role that God intended for fathers such as an uncle, aunt, neighbor, grandparent or mother. Now in the time we have remaining let's look at what God expects from all of us as parents, grandparents, and role models. In reality this text from Ephesians applies to us all. It highlights several steps for successful parenting; for raising children to love God.

First, we are told to not provoke our children to anger. Our choice is between a harsh, negative, and oppressive presence or a patient, positive, and gentle Christian involvement. *The*

Living Bible paraphrases this passage as follows: “And now a word to you parents. Don’t keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord Himself approves, with suggestions and godly advice.”

Paul reaffirms this in his letter to the Colossians in the third chapter, the twenty-first verse which states: “Parents, do not provoke your children in a way that ends up discouraging them.” The *Message* paraphrases this passage as follows: “Parents, don’t come down too hard on your children or you’ll crush their spirits.” In his book *The Total Man*, Dan Benson surveyed a number of families and found that for every positive statement made in their homes there were ten negative ones. We all have an amazing human capacity to be critical. We need to learn to see the positive in our children and others, and to frequently praise their strengths rather continually harping on their weaknesses.

Someone has noted that if a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn. If a child lives with hostility, he learns violence. If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy. If a child lives with shame, he learns to feel guilty. However, if a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence. If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate. If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice. If a child lives with approval, he learns to like himself. If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to love the world.

The second step is to bring your children up in the knowledge of the Lord. The phrase “bring them up” contains the idea of nurturing or training them. This involves several things. One is prayer, praying for your children. Dwight L. Moody tells the story about a young man who made it a habit to come home late. His father suspected that he had gone astray, so one night he told his wife to go on to bed and he would wait up for the boy. When the young man got home he was stone-drunk, and the father in his anger threw him out of the house and told him to never come back again. Later the father sat down and reflected on what he had just done and thought to himself: “Maybe I’m to blame for his son’s behavior, after all, I have never prayed with him or for him. I never warned him of the dangers of this world.”

So the father got dressed and searched all over town until he found his son and brought him home. After the boy sobered up, the father asked for his forgiveness because he had never prayed for him or lifted him up in his heart to God. The boy was touched by his father’s actions and within twenty-four hours accepted Jesus Christ into his heart and gave up drinking. We need to go to God and let the voice of Jesus sink into our heart when He said: “Bring the children unto me.” He really meant it; we must bring our children and grandchildren to Jesus each and every day in prayer.

We must also set an example for our children and grandchildren. Values are more caught than taught. While children may not be good at listening to their parents, they never fail to imitate

them and their behavior. A father started out the door for his office early one morning after a light snow fall. Turning around he saw his two-year old son trying to put his tiny feet in his own large footprints. The little fellow shouted: "Go on, I'm coming Papa, I'm coming right in your tracks." The dad picked his son up and took him back in the house and started for the office again. This man was in the habit of stopping every morning at the local bar for a drink before going to work. As he stood at the door of the bar, he could still hear the small voice saying: "Go on, I'm coming Papa, I'm coming right in your tracks." The man thought to himself: "I cannot afford to make any tracks that I would be ashamed of or sorry to have my son walk in." Are our tracks true and straight? Can we turn around and say to anyone walking behind us: "Follow me as I follow Christ?"

And then there is the one that always makes me feel guilty and that is time – spending time with my sons when they were growing up. Our children and grandchildren need our presence more than our gifts. There are many different ways to spell the word "love." Probably the best way for parents to spell love towards their children is with the letters "t-i-m-e - time." One study reported that the average American dad spends about 13 minutes a week listening to his children; while the average American mother spends 32 minutes a week.

Boswell, the famous biographer of Samuel Johnson, often referred to a special day in his childhood when his father took him fishing. The day was fixed in his mind, and he often reflected upon the many things his father had taught him in the course of their fishing experience together. After having heard about that particular excursion so often, it occurred to someone much later to check the journal that Boswell's father had kept and determine what had actually been said about the fishing trip from a parent's perspective. Turning to that date, the reader found only one sentence entered: "Gone fishing today with my son, day wasted." We may never know how the time we spend with our children and grandchildren will influence them; but we can be sure that it will have a more positive impact than not spending any time with them, and it is never wasted. As we all know only too well, our children grow up so fast and before we know it, they have left home and gone off on their own. Fortunately, God gives us a second chance with grandkids!

Finally, one day three little boys were arguing over whose father was the best. The first boy started the debate by claiming that his dad knew the mayor. Trying to top this, the second boy replied: "That's nothing; my dad knows the governor." The stakes were getting pretty high and the eavesdropping father wondered what his young son would say about him. The little boy shot back: "So what; my dad know God!" Can our children and grandchildren say the same thing: "My parents and grandparents know God?"

In closing, we must never underestimate our responsibility as parents and grandparents, and role models for our children, grandchildren and all children. Our influence cannot be

overstated. Here's the question for each of us this morning: are we a plus or a minus in the lives of those around us? Are we setting a good example for others to follow? Are our tracks worth following? Can we turn around to anyone walking behind us and say: "Follow me as I follow Jesus Christ?" Amen